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ABSTRACT

A study examined the progress of the second year of a 3-year literacy project in which undergraduate students enrolled in methods courses used children's literature during reading instruction of urban children, grades K-8 considered at-risk due to conditions of poverty. The entire school population participated in the project along with the undergraduates and their instructors. Specific data for kindergarten students through their first-grade year address changes in attitudes for reading and writing, knowledge of story structure, reading comprehension ability, decoding ability, and written language performance. Data analysis used both descriptive and correlational statistics as well as qualitative language descriptions. Baseline data indicated that the children were unsuccessful in including all elements of story structure in their oral retellings or in written story frames; many children were hesitant to write creatively for fear of making spelling errors; and attitudes toward recreational reading were less positive than attitudes toward academic reading. Results from the second year of the program indicated that: (1) ability to retell stories, the number of sight words recognized, and reading comprehension ability increased significantly; (2) reading attitudes, fairly positive to begin with, improved; (3) the children were more motivated to read and write; (4) they wrote more and took more risks with their writing; (5) they used writing for various purposes; (6) the content of their writing was more sincere; and (7) they used more mature sentence structures and wrote longer discourse. (A chart of data is attached.) (RS)

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Literacy Growth of Urban "At-Risk" Children Taught by University Students Using Literature-based Instruction

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Objectives

This paper reports on the progress for the second year of a three-year literacy project designed to enhance the literacy development of urban children, grades K-8, considered at-risk due to the conditions of poverty. This research project is being conducted in conjunction with a university/public school partnership designed not only to enhance the literacy learning of urban school children, but also to develop and strengthen the reading/language arts teaching abilities of preservice and inservice teachers. The specific objectives of the three-year project related to the elementary school children are to: (1) describe the language and literacy abilities of the children at several points throughout the three-year period; (2) provide the children with small group literature-based reading/language arts instruction; and (3) compare these children's literacy achievement to other similar groups who do not participate in this literacy project. At this time, results of descriptive and correlational analyses for a comparison of data collected in the first and second year for approximately 200 children in grades kindergarten through seventh is available. Specific data for kindergarten students through their first grade year will be presented here. These data address changes in attitudes for reading and writing, knowledge of story structure, reading comprehension ability, decoding ability, and written language performance.

Theoretical Framework

In the 1990s literacy education is rapidly moving toward literature based-instruction for all children, including children labeled "at-risk" in culturally diverse urban school settings. Research over the past few decades supports the role of literature exposure and literature-based language activities in children's emergence of language and literacy (Cazden, 1981; Chomsky, 1972; Wells, 1986; Purcell-Gates, 1988; Sulzby, 1985 to name a few). Reports on the effects of literature-based instruction in general document its success (Juel, 1988; Roser, Hoffman, and Farest, 1990; D'Alessandro, 1990; Allen et al, 1991; Dekker, 1991; Morrow 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1991; Norton, 1993; Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1991) with children identified as "at-risk" or Shirley Brice Heath's would call learners of this type "Children of Promise."

It has been recommended by Tompkins and McGee (1993) that children's literature be used to enhance at-risk students' oral language development. Purcell-Gates (1988) found that pre-school children who have been "well-read-to" acquire knowledge of discourse styles. Juel's (1988) longitudinal study which examined the literacy development of at-risk children in grades one through four suggested that doing more reading, or more listening to books read, is important to acquiring ideas with which to write one's own stories. Roser, Hoffman, and Farest (1990) found impressive gains on standardized achievement test scores (CTBS) for at-risk students in the six schools that participated in their Language to Literacy project, a literature-based program. Morrow (1991) examined the effect of combining literature-based reading with traditional reading

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instruction on the reading achievement of minority children from low socioeconomic homes in an urban school setting for a one-year period. She found significant differences on measures of oral and written story retellings, a probed comprehension test, oral and written creations of original stories, and on language complexity measures favoring the combination of literature-based and traditional reading instruction groups. Therefore, inclusion of children's literature as an integral part of reading instruction has a high probability of benefitting "at-risk" learners in their oral and written language acquisition.

Methods/Techniques

Participants in this project are university students enrolled in two semester-long methods courses (i.e., reading and language arts) and their two university instructors, and the entire student population for one urban elementary school (K-8) located in a large southeastern city (of the 300 children, 273 are eligible for government-subsidized breakfast and lunch; many live in low-income housing; 80% are African American; 16% European American; 3% Hispanic American; 1% Asian American). After a one-week orientation on campus, each university student is responsible for teaching the same group of children (n = 8-15). University faculty are also located at the school to conduct methods classes, consult with students and teachers, and guide and supervise the students. The university students meet at the school twice a week, three hours each day. One hundred five minutes each day are reserved for course meetings; the other fifty-five minutes are spent implementing instructional lessons with the children for a total of 28 hours over the course of the semester. Each lesson must include use of children's literature related to a grade level theme, and writing. All literature presented is accompanied by visuals, or props (e.g., each kindergarten child held a mirror as he/she listened to Snow White's "mirror, mirror on the wall" refrain), or by appropriate music (e.g., playing Vivaldi's Four Seasons as background for working on a mural illustrating a book about Spring). At every session children either read themselves, or are read to, and engage in dialogue journal writing. Certain assignments are required of all participants (e.g., directed reading-thinking activities; discussing story features and their connections; creative bookmaking; Readers' Theatre; designing and creating wall murals; comparing and contrasting fictional and expository text; and performing student-created, theme-related plays). A typical session includes children reading or rereading literature selections; university students helping children use syntactic and semantic clues to predict and confirm/correct what they read; writing or editing a story or a letter; entering "new" vocabulary terms and concepts in context into individual student dictionaries; and children corresponding in dialogue journals with their university students.

Data Source

In order to make comparisons over the three-year period, the first data collection period (1991-1992) resulted in a set of baseline data for each student in the school. For most students information was collected regarding literacy attitudes and perceptions, writing abilities, knowledge of story structure, reading comprehension and vocabulary abilities, and word recognition and decoding abilities. For the kindergarten group discussed here, data on literacy attitudes and perceptions, knowledge of story structure through story retellings and picture sequencing, reading comprehension through picture sequencing, word recognition by means of a sight word list, and writing samples through dialogue journals were collected. The specific measures used will now be briefly described.

Literacy Attitude Survey. This instrument is a combination of a quantitative measure (the "Elementary Reading Attitude Survey" by McKenna and Kear, 1990), and a researcher-devised qualitative instrument designed to examine each child's understanding/perception of reading and writing processes. Some sample questions include: "What is reading?"; How did you learn to read?"; "Why do people write?"; and "How do you know if your writing is any good?"

This survey was administered individually during September for both the 1991-92 and 1992-93 school years. The quantitative portion of the survey, which examines attitudes toward both recreational and academic reading (ten items each), was scored in accordance with the directions given by McKenna and Kear (1990) using first grade norms for the kindergarten students. Children's comments from the qualitative portion were grouped for each item, for each individual and compared across the two years.

Oral Story Retelling. This is another individually-administered procedure designed to determine each child's knowledge of story structure, and indirectly, their listening comprehension and oral language abilities. Students in each grade level listened to a theme story read orally by a university student (i.e., K-2 heard Goldilocks and The Three Bears by Lorinda Bryan Cauley; 3-4 heard Strega Nona by Tomie de Paola; 5-6 heard Jumanji by Chris Van Allsburg; and 7-8 heard Nettie's Trip South by Ann Turner). Following the oral reading of the story, each child met individually with a university student, graduate assistant, or course instructor to retell the story. These retellings were tape recorded, later transcribed, and then scored both quantitatively (Morrow, 1988, 1990) and holistically (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983). Morrow's quantitative scoring guidelines yield a total possible score of 10. The holistic scoring guidelines yield scores ranging from 1 to 5. These latter scores were arrived at by a consensus of three raters using Irwin and Mitchell's criteria for judging the richness of retellings.

Reading Comprehension. Assessing reading comprehension allowed for a group administration procedure. Each child silently read a theme-related book for which there were multiple copies (i.e., K-2 read Teeny Tiny by Jill Bennett, illus. by Tomie De Paola; 3-4 read Anansi the Spider by Gerald McDermott; 5-6 read Miss Nelson is Missing by Harry Allard and James Marshall; and 7-8 read Wagon Wheels by Barbara Brenner). Students in grades 3-8 were then asked to write the missing information in a story frame adapted from Macon, Bewell, and Vogt (1991, p. 6). The children in grades K-2 were asked to sequence a set of four pictures representing important parts of the story they read silently. Percentage of accuracy was the score recorded for all students.

Decoding and Word Recognition. The K-2nd grade children were given Clay's "Ready-to-Read" Word Test (Clay, 1985, pp. 31-33) because it provides a sampling of high frequency words found in many beginning reading materials. The total score possible was 15. Clay provides a conversion from raw score to stanine score. The stanine score was recorded for further data analysis. Children in grades 3-8 took Cunningham's (1990) "Names Test" and percentage of accuracy score was recorded.

Dialogue Journals. Dialogue journals, which are written conversations between teachers and students, can yield data on discourse functions and language structures (see Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). On the first day that university students met with their children, they gave each child a "blue book" (i.e., a 6" x 8" collection of about 16 blank, lined pages commonly used by universities for testing purposes) for informal writing between the university student and the individual child. The children were

encouraged to decorate their journals in order to instill a sense of ownership. Descriptive analyses examined aspects of children's competence in written discourse.

Results

Data analyses use both descriptive and correlational statistics as well as qualitative language descriptions. Space constraints do not allow for complete information to be presented in this abstract; however, the trends in the data would seem to support the following statements. Baseline data indicated that the children were in much need of rich literary experiences. Most were unsuccessful in including all elements of story structure in their oral retellings or in written story frames. Many of the children were hesitant to write creatively for fear of making spelling errors. They were unwilling to take risks and "invent" spellings either in dialogue journals or in creative story writing. Attitudes toward recreational reading were less positive than attitudes toward academic reading, although reading attitudes in general became more positive with each year in school. A comparison of the second year results indicate dramatic growth in many areas. For example, there was significant growth in the ability to retell stories, in the number of sight words recognized, and in reading comprehension ability. While reading attitudes did not improve significantly, they did improve. And it should be noted that reading attitudes were fairly positive to begin with. Responses to the narrative portion of the literacy attitude survey as well as dialogue journal entries reveal the impact of a literature-based program with many references to the specific children's literature used.

Informal observations indicate that the children are more motivated to read and write, they are writing more and taking more risks with their writing, and they are using writing for various purposes (e.g., writing friendly and persuasive letters, poems, creative stories). The content of their writing is more honest and sincere, and they are using more mature sentence structures and writing longer discourse.

Educational Significance

The significance of this literacy research project is that it is designed to contribute empirical evidence supporting the benefits of using children's literature in reading instruction, especially with urban children who typically have not experienced the advantages that exposure to literature at early ages would have provided toward their literacy acquisition. Assumptions about kindergartners or first graders coming to school already familiar with such classics as Goldilocks and the Three Bears, or Cinderella cannot be made with urban learners who are considered at-risk due to the conditions of poverty. It is not enough to simply recommend that the parents and teachers of these learners read more to their children. Instead we must look more closely at the school curriculum afforded these learners. We need to determine which strategies and activities are most effective with literature-based instruction. The data collected in this project will help to provide answers to several important questions. These include: What types of literacy experiences are effective with urban, at-risk children? What syntax patterns, patterns of cohesion and coherence, and spelling patterns emerge in the writing of urban children as they experience children's literature? What language functions are evident in their compositions and oral language, and how do their reading, writing, and speaking abilities change? Do these children become more interested in reading and writing? Do they develop more positive attitudes? How do their achievement test scores compare to similar children attending schools that do not provide literature-based instruction?

First Name	Year	Grade	LAS Recreational Percentile	LAS Academic Percentile	LAS Total Percent	Story Retelling Score 1	Story Retelling Score 2	Story Comp-rehension	Words Test
AMANDA	9192	K	2	21	5	0.69	2	25	1
AMANDA	9192	K	---	---	---	4.00	1	50	---
AMANDA	9293	1	26	39	31	---	---	---	4
AMANDA	9293	1	---	---	---	4.44	2	25	---
JESSE	9192	K	0	0	0	1.44	1	0	0
JESSE	9192	K	---	---	---	1.08	1	50	---
JESSE	9293	1	7	34	15	---	---	---	2
JESSE	9293	1	---	---	---	8.89	3	25	---
JENNIFER	9192	K	17	25	18	6.35	3	100	1
JENNIFER	9192	K	---	---	---	10.00	5	100	---
JENNIFER	9293	1	21	44	31	---	---	---	1
JENNIFER	9293	1	---	---	---	10.00	3	50	---
ERIC	9192	K	72	63	69	4.00	2	0	0
ERIC	9192	K	---	---	---	5.00	1	25	---
ERIC	9293	1	2	0	0	---	---	---	1
ERIC	9293	1	---	---	---	9.00	3	---	---
SAMANTHA	9192	K	89	53	75	0.47	1	0	1
SAMANTHA	9192	K	---	---	---	5.30	2	25	---
SAMANTHA	9293	1	12	69	40	---	---	---	1
SAMANTHA	9293	1	---	---	---	---	0	100	---
KEIDRA	9192	K	81	99	90	0.47	1	0	0
KEIDRA	9192	K	---	---	---	9.00	3	100	---
KEIDRA	9293	1	99	99	99	---	---	---	4
KEIDRA	9293	1	---	---	---	2.94	2	50	---
ADAMA	9192	K	77	53	66	5.00	3	25	0
ADAMA	9192	K	---	---	---	3.88	2	50	---
ADAMA	9293	1	92	63	82	---	---	---	2
ADAMA	9293	1	---	---	---	9.75	4	100	---

First Name	Year	Grade	LAS Recreational Percentile	LAS Academic Percentile	LAS Total Percent	Story Retelling Score 1	Story Retelling Score 2	Story Comp-rehension	Words Test
GLENN	9192	K	0	0	0	1.33	1	50	0
GLENN	9192	K	- - -	- - -	- - -	3.00	1	25	- - -
GLENN	9293	1	99	99	99	- - -	- - -	- - -	4
GLENN	9293	1	- - -	- - -	- - -	0.75	1	100	- - -

	K Mean	Gr 1 Mean	t-Value	p
LAS Recreational	41.44	51.63	-0.59	0.560
LAS Academic	34.63	59.45	-1.69	0.113
LAS Total	35.55	55.55	-1.31	0.207
Story Retelling 1	2.02	16.71	-1.89	0.083
Story Retelling 2	1.44	2.38	-2.01	0.059
Story Comprehension	19.44	82.00	-2.99	0.009
Words Test	0.33	2.54	-4.76	0.000